

# **A Ray of Hope for Girls in Trouble: Alternative Education Services in a Singapore Girls' Home**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper provides a trans-cultural perspective of emotional/behavioral difficulties and a brief overview of the subculture of today's young adolescent girls. Features of successful alternative education services provided at a Singapore girls' home are also presented. This paper concludes with a consideration of implications for teachers and other professionals working with girls in trouble.*

Situated at the southern tip of Malaysia, Singapore is positioned in the rapidly developing Southeast Asia. Since her independence from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore has now become one of the most successful and prosperous countries in Asia and has achieved many world-class accomplishments. This small island nation has one of the busiest ports in the world, operates a world-class airlines, and is now recognized as an international financial, trading and business hub. Singapore is also considered as one of the most literate countries in the world (Johnstone, Mandryk, & Johnstone, 2001). In the past few years, Singapore has been listed as one of the top performing countries in math and science at the secondary levels (Smith, 2006). Singaporean students' academic achievements are now recognized worldwide.

However, just like many other countries in the world, Singapore now also faces special challenges in the area of nurturing and educating its children and youths (Chen & Tan, 2006). Over the last decade in Singapore, an increasing number of juveniles are being involved with the formal justice system and juvenile homes, and the increased rate of female offenders is noticeably greater than that of boys (Zhang, 2008). Alternative education for female juvenile delinquents has become a challenge in the modern society of Singapore (Chen & Tan; Zhang). In light of the unique social and cultural context, it may be of interest to international readers to see the impact of culture differences in shaping the alternative education services in Singapore.

This research was conducted as part of the first author's Singapore Research Academic Fund Project which aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the alternative education program in a Singapore girls' home. This article provides a trans-cultural perspective of emotional/behavioral difficulties and a brief overview of the subculture of today's young adolescent girls. In commenting on these themes, the authors draw on a body of literature (mostly from the 1990s-to date) that documents

and analyzes issues of emotional and behavioral challenges in young girls experience. Features of successful alternative education services provided at a Singapore girls' home are then presented. Finally, this paper concludes with a consideration of implications for teachers and other professionals working with girls in trouble in other nations.

## **Emotional/Behavioral Difficulties: A Trans-Cultural Perspective**

Both in the United States and many other countries in the world, there is consistent evidence that externalizing problems are more prevalent in boys, whereas internalizing problems are more common in girls (Liu, Sun, & Neiderhiser, 2001). Caseau, Luckasson, and Kroth (1994) speculate that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) definition and the procedures and instruments used to identify emotional/behavioral disorders may be biased in favor of males, who typically exhibit externalizing disorders, resulting in unequal distribution of mental health services. Literature also shows that adolescence can be a challenging period for many girls, even those who have strong support from home and school (Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). It is apparent that compared to boys, when adolescent girls embark on the journey of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growths, they are more likely to experience less happiness and lower positive self-esteem, but higher levels of anxiety and more struggles. Therefore, for girls with emotional/behavioral difficulties (E/BD), adolescence is a time of heightened psychological risk.

A look into the literature also indicates that in both the western and eastern societies, today's contemporary culture is shaping the experience of adolescent girls in some critical and troublesome ways. Suicidal behavior among children and adolescents is a major public health problem in many countries in the world. In the United States of America

(U.S.A.), researchers (e.g., Kauffman & Landrum, 2009; Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998) have found many girls experience depression, family conflicts, disturbing eating habits, and suicidal attempts). In general, there are more young women than young men that attempt suicide, and ninety percent of adolescents exhibiting eating disorders are girls (Miller, 1994; Portner, 2000). Among Australian teenagers, suicide is the most common cause of death after car accidents ("Body image issues for women", 2007). In Japan, the suicide rates go up every year and a large percentage of young Japanese girls are on medications for mental stress and emotional disorders (Ong, 2002).

Back in the 1990s, researchers found that eating disorders did exist among females in many non-Western cities such as Hong Kong (Lee, Ho, & Hsu, 1993), Malaysia (Goh, Ong, & Subramanian, 1993), and India (Khandelwal, Sharan, & Saxenda, 1995). More recently, Hesketh, Jian Ding, and Tomkins (2001) found that in China, smoking rates among female youths are low (5.4%), yet proportionately more girls than boys smoked very early. Sun (2007) reported that anorexia nervosa and bulimia have become a serious problem in Singapore, and the majority of the sufferers are young females in their early to late teens. Our research on female juveniles in Singapore also shows that over the last decade, an increasing number of juveniles are being served in the formal justice system and diversion programs (i.e., programs such as the girls' and boys' homes that attempt to deal with offenses outside the formal correctional system) due to offenses such as stealing, involvement with gangs, and dealing drugs.

In fact, many of today's young women and girls are falling prey to cycles of destructive behavior and crime that lead to incarceration and broken lives. Statistics show that in the past few years, two prominent patterns in female juvenile delinquency trends have emerged. First, the number of girls arrested has increased at a faster rate than that of boys. This trend holds true for girls of all races in both the United States and Singapore. According to the United States of America Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), between 1989 and 1998 the number of girls arrested had increased 50.3%, as compared to only 16.5% for boys (Chesney-Lind, 2001). In 1999, FBI also noted that every year, girls account for one out of four arrests of young people (Chesney-Lind). In Singapore, official statistics from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS; 2004) shows that in the year of 2002, there were 383 admissions (male: 304; female: 79) to MCYS Juvenile Homes. The number rose to 576 (male: 442; female: 134) in 2003, with an increase of 45% for males and 70% for females. While the majority of these juveniles are boys, the increase rate of female offenders is noticeably greater than that of the boys. Second, in recent years girls are being arrested for committing more violent crimes (Chesney-Lind).

With the increase of offenses committed by females, adolescent girls have presented challenges to the juvenile justice system as a result of academic difficulties, high

incidences of victimization (physical, sexual and/or emotional) and significant health issues (Adams, Brooks, & Rose, 2001; MCYS, 2004). However, one national study on juvenile programming conducted in the United States indicates that among the 443 juvenile program evaluations conducted since 1950, 34.8% of these programs only served males and 42.4% served primarily boys (Chesney-Lind, 2001). In 1992, only a meager of 2.3% of juvenile programs was for girls and 5.9% served primarily girls. Although these studies were conducted in the American context, their findings shed new light on what can be done in other countries in terms of delinquency prevention and intervention.

With more girls going through the juvenile system, understanding the risk factors that affect girls is crucial. Fortunately, research on juvenile delinquency has been well-established, and there is a plethora of studies on the risk factors that exist for adolescent delinquency and offenses. Some of the recognized risk factors include negative attitude toward school, low self-esteem, negative body image, lack of adult supervision, physical and sexual abuse, negative peer group/involvement with gangs, substance abuse, bullying, and early sexual behaviors as well as family factors such as separation, divorce, and stepfamilies (e.g., Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Lloyd, 2005; Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). Though many of the factors listed above impact both boys and girls, factors such as mental health problems, abuse, and negative body image issues are more common among females and are, therefore, likely to differentially relate to juvenile delinquency. Risk factors are cumulative, the likelihood of having behavioral or mental health problems will increase when one has more risk factors. Though not all risk factors will put girls on a given trajectory toward delinquency, prevention and intervention should be programmed to decrease risks and increase girls' resilience. In addition, girls' routes into juvenile justice system and their needs while in the programs are often different from those of boys. Serious criminal behavior is rarely the reason for girls' admission to the juvenile system; their offenses often result from problems in family relationships, family or professional concerns about moral and sexual behaviors, or substance abuse (Lloyd, 2005; Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998).

### **Subculture of Today's Young Adolescent Girls**

A number of studies of teenage girls' subcultures in the U.S.A. provide useful insights about the conflicts adolescent girls experience and the concerns they express. Taylor (1993) identifies these three conflicts as the domesticity/paid work conflict in relation to their futures, the "slags or drags" conflict relating to sexuality, and the adolescence/femininity conflict relating to maturity. Street (2005) argues that teenage girls experience conflicts resulting from the contradictory messages they receive about how they should behave. As a result, girls tend to judge one another on dominant cultural ideals of femininity, and are more likely to talk about who is popular and why, about

the different groups in their schools, about fashion trends and of course, boys. Too often, the pressure to match up and their hopes for independence and freedom, or simply desires to please others, often cause girls to make poor decisions and over exert themselves at the expense of their health and pleasure. For this reason, Stabiner (2002) argues that girls' schools offer great freedom and provide a girl with the opportunity to be herself.

In view of our sexually explicit contemporary cultures, author Wendy Shalit (2000) has a different proposal for young women. In her book *A return to modesty: Discovering the lost virtue*, Shalit offers a sustained defense of chastity, extolling the virtues of 19th century social and sexual norms, which took the culture by storm. She argues that the traditional feminine virtue of modesty is a quality inherent in girls, and that a return to modesty may place women on equal footing with men. Shalit also believes that modesty is the solution to many of the problems—from sexual harassment to depression to eating disorders—faced by young women today. Shalit's work represents the first major attempt to provide an intellectual framework for "true love waits" and the rest of the pro-virginity movement.

Historically, in the context of the U.S.A. and many other cultures alike, there were more years of girlhood than teens experience today. Although the Girl Scouts or the Young Women's Christian still exist in many cultures today, one hundred years ago there were many other organizations devoted to engaging girls in feminine, healthy activities (Brumberg, 1997). Many girls spent time each week participating in handicrafts, nature study, literature, music, and charitable works, which kept them engaged and busy (Brumberg). Besides the elements of religious faith and morality in these organizations, girls also found support and friendship in the activities. And the attention they received from their leaders, young adult women to whom they were typically not related, conveyed the sense that they were valued and cared for by the society. Today, societal changes have made a dramatic impact upon the lives and experiences of young women and girls. Although today's girls reach physical maturity earlier, the societies they are in provide little guidance and social support for them, a situation that leaves them unsupported in their development and extremely vulnerable to the excesses of popular culture and to pressure from peer groups.

In the late 1990s, a few youth workers from Singapore began to campaign for comprehensive services for girl with emotional/behavioral challenges. As a result, a girls' home was established with the aim to provide a refuge for girls in trouble. Today, the home is one of the two residential programs for at-risk girls and female juvenile delinquents in Singapore. It serves an average population of 60, grades 6 through 12, from various regions of Singapore. The current total population of the facility is 93% Chinese, 4% Indians, 3% Malay and others. Review of the residents' records also reveals that about 70% of the residents in the research site are from low income families in Singapore.

Due to the fact that currently there is no consensual definition of E/BD or standard and reliable screening instrument for children and youth at different ages in Singapore (Chen & Tan, 2006), residents in the home do not have a formal diagnosis of E/BD. However, they have a history of significant behavioral, emotional, social, and school related problems at their home campuses. Offenses committed by the girls range from status offense (i.e., crimes only a minor can commit such as running away, truancy, and curfew violation) to property crime, dealing with drugs, and rioting.

### **Features of Successful Alternative Education Programs for Girls with E/BD and Girls' Perceptions of Their School Experience**

Program evaluations indicate that integrated academic and vocational education, career development, and work-based learning contributed to successful results (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). As Conchas and Clark (2002) have discovered, the connected and focused curriculum of a career academy gave students "a solid foundation to pursue their college and career goals. They affirmed their professional expectations and remained optimistic despite adversity (p. 305)."

Staff in the home recognizes that one of the most powerful intervention strategies for girls with E/BD is to deliver education that foster academic success and positive changes. However, educating girls with E/BD involves more than teaching them the basic academic skills. It means preparing the girls to master life challenges by focusing on creating healthy attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles, empowering them to succeed in the face of trials and transitions in life, and giving them skills to help them realize their potential. But how can educators and professionals put these principles into practice? To meet the special needs of the residents and give them a second chance to pursue academic studies, in 2004 a Learning Center was established. Today, the Learning Center is supported by a multidisciplinary team of teachers, counselors, and social workers who are committed to addressing the concerns and conflicts young girls experience and helping the girls in their journey of learning and growth.

To provide a solid framework and general principles for interventions in the home, staff at the Learning Center conceived and proposed the E-force theory which is about the forces of influences that make the person who she is. The E-theory discusses the stages of existence, exploration and experience and looks into the developmental stages of a student. The core belief the E-theory is to empower the student and transform the energy of the student into a positive influence (A. Choo, personal communication, November 7, 2006). Staff in the home believes that it is essential for the student to understand her true identity and senses her purpose so that she will make the change and progress gradually. By incorporating the E theory into every learning opportunity, the adolescent girls can hone their critical

thinking skills, improve their self-esteem, and strengthen their academic abilities. In practice, the E-theory is translated into three pillar elements: experiential learning opportunities, personal development program, and the mentoring services.

### *Experiential Learning Opportunities*

The Learning Center academic program primary deals with the girls' concerns in academic performance and future. The Learning Center prides itself on developing student self-awareness. At the Learning Center, students are encouraged to discover their talents and abilities and teachers are therefore able to provide learning opportunities that recognize the girls' multiple intelligence and intrinsically motivate them to embrace learning. Through discussions, journal writings and various other activities, teachers and staff gain insight into the students' varied abilities and interests. Interestingly, the majority of students being referred to the Learning Center are "right brain dominant," which means that they have a tendency to be intuitive and creative, and need hands-on and guided experiential learning activities.

Girls reported that they feel empowered to pursue learning when they knew lessons are designed to capitalize on their strengths. When including experiential learning in differentiated lessons, teachers increase the potential to foster positive learning outcomes. In addition, by incorporating the multi-sensory activities, students are enabled to obtain new information that reinforces new knowledge. In the meantime, the learning process became more engaging and fulfilling when students are encouraged to interact with the teachers and teaching materials. Indeed, when curriculum materials are presented in ways that ensure all learners have meaningful learning opportunities, students are more likely to take ownership of their educational experience.

Staff at the Learning Center recognizes that school attendance does not necessarily equate to the commitment to learning, as some girls are unwilling or not able to participate in classroom activities, and many are "there but not there". In addition, many of the girls with behavioral problems tend to be visual-spatial learners, rather than linear-logical thinkers, therefore, opportunities are provided to help the girls learn creatively. With the hope of enhancing visual and experiential learning, learning corners dedicated to aquatic studies, botany and pet care have been set up at the Center. In addition, interested students have opportunities to go on periodic visits to pet farms, beauty salons, and various art studios. The home has become a hotbed of creative expression. Girls commented that the introduction of a specialized department means that there is little idle time and the day is more interesting and busier, and that they are able to lead healthier and productive lifestyles.

It is also apparent that active learning that involves the girls in the decision-making process and with the "real world" is more effective than the traditional show-and-tell methods. However,

in the majority of the mainstream schools, while many teachers and staff tirelessly find ways to make sure the girls' voices are heard, detailed target setting and specification of curriculum content often hinder the girls from making choices about their own learning.

A key feature of the Learning Center is its recognition of the importance of the social and emotional aspects of girls' learning. With the guidance of the E-force theory, teachers at the Learning Center applied working knowledge of each student's past and current developmental paths. They hold that every student's progress along these paths is both predictable and unique to the individual, and teachers need to understand what developmental paths a student has traveled in order to understand her receptivity to learning in the present.

Recognizing that quality education builds character as well as academic proficiency, teachers and staff at the Learning Center often discuss with the girls issues related to different values, religions, politics, music, and other aspects of the popular culture. Girls are given opportunities to explore and to be challenged about their values and attitudes toward topics they are interested. They are encouraged to search information from the Internet, movies, books, and periodicals that supported or contradicted to their views. Examining information from various sources also helped them to interpret data effectively, to formulate intelligent opinions, and most of all, to strengthen their critical thinking skills.

Indeed, teachers and staff in school play an important role in the girls' lives. Teachers can help the girls to embrace who they are by respecting the individuality of each of them, and encourage resiliency factors and life skills that help them make a positive transition to womanhood and prevent future delinquency. However, in Singapore, many mainstream schools are not sufficiently equipped to handle students with major behavioral issues (Chen & Tan, 2006). Other than the school counselors who help the common behavior problems, in regular schools, there is no specific resource classroom, program, or trained school staff for students with severe E/BD. It is not surprising that without adequate support, these students often end up leaving school.

It is also recognized in the home that an orientation toward the future serves as a protective factor by allowing girls to look beyond immediate life circumstances. Indeed, girls who value and aspire to educational achievement tend to have a compelling sense of the future. On the other hand, those who are dispirited about their chances of finding employment are more likely to drift away from the educational system. Alternative programs that provide authentic, engaging learning that connects school and work can instill hope in these youths. Therefore, it is essential to engage girls with E/BD as active contributors in defining their own needs and strengths and to enable them to develop some confidence in their own power and to promote participation.



To provide a more comprehensive educational program with services across a continuum of care, the home staff has been planning to set up a middle college. This middle college will be a high school which is located on a college campus. It will offer college courses and requires career education or community service as part of the graduation requirement. Students who meet the requirements will get diplomas upon program completion. As an alternative high school programs which aims to rekindle the desire to learn, the middle college in the home will offer an alternative education that better meets the needs of these students. It will be a small school setting where students have greater opportunities for guidance and improvement.

This first middle college in Singapore will be a challenge of the traditional ideas of who can go to college. Middle colleges such as this are typically made up of students of diverse backgrounds, and are operated with the understanding that not all students fit the mold of the “traditional high school student” (“Mott Middle College”, 2006). Middle colleges serve students whose needs are not being met by the traditional high school, provide college courses and give underrepresented minority students an opportunity to pursue higher education. Although these students may be just as capable of succeeding, they have turned off to education. The middle college program at home will therefore be established to provide them the support services needed to be successful.

#### *Personal Development Program.*

This program was created to help the girls deal with their concerns about their body image, identity, and relationships. It also aims to help them develop healthy attitudes, adopt healthier life styles, enhance self-esteem, empower them to manage life events, and to give them life skills to realize their potential. With this in mind, the Learning Center workshops about personal, social, and health education (PSHE), which is another major component of the personal development program, has been developed and conducted.

The PSHE curriculum adopts a Christian perspective, which recognizes the link between physical and spiritual well-being and students’ readiness to learn and achieve. It considers the pressures that young girls face as they mature, helps them to look at life’s priorities, and assess their personal foundations. It also promotes the belief that delaying sexual activity offers girls a protective factor against trauma, unwanted pregnancy, and other risks that could lead to delinquency. The level of personal practice, discourses of Christianity and feminism are interwoven in a way that is specifically intended to address the girls’ needs and concerns. All students undergo one hour of instruction, reflection and coaching from Monday to Friday in this area. Besides the discreet work, PSHE is also an integral part of school life of which many aspects also contribute to the PSHE of the students. Workshops are conducted to help girls

learn about healthy diets and life styles, issues of morality and sexuality, parenting skills, as well as assertiveness skills, communication and many other social skills.

#### *Mentoring Services*

To help girls make a positive transition to womanhood and prevent future delinquency, social support from others is essential (Brumberg, 1997; Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). Social supports and protection need to be in place to guarantee that girls could have a safe childhood until their emotional and intellectual development could catch up with their biological and physical maturation. However, as mentioned previously, without strong family support, it has become all too easy for young girls to be influenced by the attitudes and values in movies, television, and peer pressure. Unfortunately, many of the girls came from broken families and were left to their own devices since they were young. Too often, these young girls had more freedom than they could handle. In the meantime, they missed positive female role models at home, and the absence of an authority figure who can discipline, guide, and help them make the value choices which so often confront and confuse them.

To deal with this address, mentoring services are set up in the home. More than half of the residents (58%) have a mentor. A mentor’s another goal is to help the girls understand how they learn best so that they can strengthen their academic abilities. According to the girls, the support and encouragement girls receive from mentors, especially older women, is very important to them, since many of them did not have friends and schoolmates who share their interest and listen to their thoughts.

Interviews with the girls show that overall they feel very positive about their new experience in the home. Other comments from the girls includes: “Experience in the home is life-changing,” “I have found new hope and a way to a more positive future as a result of the Learning Center programs”, and “Teachers here are great and I am glad that I am now here and not in the mainstream school.” Some girls also indicated that their personal growth would continue after they leave the Learning Center and that they now have a chance to reach their highest potential.

#### **Discussion and Implications for Alternative Education in other Nations**

It was previously stated that in both the western and eastern societies, it is apparent that many of today’s adolescent girls are in crisis. Though the traditional stereotype of girls is that they are gentle, compassionate, and relational, nowadays we also witness girls who bully and commit violent and rebellious acts. The conventional view that girls are the gentler gender which is made up of sugar and spice is now challenged, and with the

increase of offenses committed by girls, today's the juvenile justice systems around the world are facing an uphill task.

What implications can we draw from Singapore's experience? First, girls engaged in delinquent behavior often have multiple and unique programming needs, and the success of the Singapore girls' home suggests that programming adapted to girls' academic, personal/developmental and social needs is more likely to result in positive outcomes. At the girls' home Learning Center, the integration of academic and vocational education gives girls a chance and a foundation to pursue their academic and career goals. In addition, although the link between physical and spiritual well-being is sometimes constructed as something to fear in secular societies, in the case of the Singapore girls' home, recognizing the spiritual dimensions and the adoption of the Christian perspective are central to helping girls finding their identities, purpose in life, and personal foundations. Researchers (e.g., Alexander, 2003; Baker, 2003) also echo this and maintain that spirituality supports feeling whole and constructing a life worth living. Further, involvement with at least one significant positive adult (e.g., mentor, teacher, and parent) and communities is essential in providing effective and lasting outcomes for girls. Overall, the translation of the E-theory into the three pillar elements, i.e., the experiential learning opportunities, personal development program, and the mentoring services seems to play a key role in the program's success.

Second, as indicated in the current study, when programming interventions for girls with violent behaviors, considerations must also be given to the fact that a girl's social context, the options available to her, and the culture she lives will affect how and why she gets into trouble. Interventions for girls with E/BD must also be framed within societal expectations of girls and women. Gender roles and definitions play into how girls behave and how they are treated within the school and juvenile justice system. As suggested by Chesney-Lind and Shelden (2004), explaining female delinquency requires understanding the gender structures of society and their impact on behavior. Those gender structures include, but are not limited to, parental attitude toward achievement, expectations regarding responsibilities in the family, socialization regarding public behaviors and expression of emotion, peer and school expectations of the female and male roles, and work and career opportunities.

Thirdly, juvenile justice systems also need to develop specific programs for girls that focus on positive female development, building relationships, addressing victimization, improving self-esteem, and conflict resolution. To create and enhance programs specifically for girls, there must be a financial commitment from the government and communities to staff training as well as promotion of sensitivity towards and needs, customs, and expectations of all stakeholders involved.

Finally, many of the successful alternative education services and programs would also benefit all students. Best

practices should not be limited to girls with E/BD—a small percentage of the population. Mainstream schools can learn from these programs and operate with the best practices.

## Summary

Though has been some progress in serving the female juvenile delinquent and girls at risk, in the U.S.A. and other countries in the world, many schools and communities are still unprepared to address the specific needs of girls who are involved in or at-risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Current information about the adequacy of education services for young girls with E/BD in correctional settings is also limited. Clearly, more research is needed regarding the effectiveness of interventions and preventions programs for young adolescent girls with E/BD.

In addition, although girls still represent a relatively small number of offenders, their numbers are growing and the types of crimes with which they are charged are increasingly more serious (e.g., Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; MCYS, 2004). There is much to be done to effectively guide prevention and intervention efforts and fill gaps in service for young girls with emotional/behavioral challenges.

Fortunately, there is a growing awareness of the needs of adolescent girls with E/BD who are likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system, and educators in alternative services now have a better understanding of female adolescent development. When this understanding is translated into practice effectively, alternative education programs can provide new opportunities for academic, social and behavioral success, and most of all, a new ray of hope for our troubled and troubling girls.

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